

**THE
VOYAGE OF JOHN CÂBOT IN 1497
TO NORTH AMERICA**

**THE TIME OCCUPIED IN COASTING
ALSO
THE ISLAND OF ST. JOHN.**

**Mr. G. R. F. PROWSE'S FURTHER REPLY TO
MR. HENRY HARRISSE.**

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JOHN CABOT AND THE MATTHEW.

My former letter dealt mainly with the date 6 Aug. in the *Fust* chronicle. To the argument then advanced Mr. HARRISSE frankly confesses he has no answer just now. My letter in addition merely contained the statement that the unreliability of the date 24 June and the limitation of information available in 1565 had not been established.

MR. HARRISSE (who appears to confuse me with my father, Judge Prowse) rejects the date 24 June on two grounds; he thinks it does not allow Cabot time enough for what he may fairly be assumed to have done before returning, and believes the date was invented by Sebastian Cabot or Dr. Grajales to tally with the name St. John.

Soncino (evidently more intimately acquainted with the circumstances of Cabot's first voyage than Pasqualigo), in December, 1497, makes this remarkable statement :—

"The principal people in the enterprize belong to Bristo. They are great seamen and now they know where to go, they say that the voyage thither will not occupy more than fifteen days after leaving Ibernia."

Now these calculations cannot have been based upon experience gained on the outward voyage, for the same writer reports that it occupied a "long time." It seems equally to my purpose, therefore, whether fifteen days was the time actually taken upon the return journey or an estimate by contemporary experienced seamen, most likely participators in the voyage, of the time ships would take to sail about 400 leagues (for it seems almost certain from Soncino's letter of August and the two later ones of Puebla and Ayala that Pasqualigo's estimation of 700 was excessive). Accepting the dates, 24 June for the landfall and 6 August for the arrival in Bristol, a return voyage of not more than twenty days to Bristol would leave three weeks for taking in water, &c., and acquiring some idea of the country to report to the king.

A few facts show that three weeks were more than sufficient to satisfy the requirements of the case. Soncino, in December, reduces his own earlier remarks about the "two very large and fertile islands," and the statement of Pasqualigo that Cabot coasted 300 leagues (an impossibility if the voyage only lasted three months), to the much more modest one that Cabot when he hit upon land, "hoisted the royal standard and took possession for His Highness, and having obtained various proofs of his discovery he returned."

"In returning Cabot saw two islands to the right," Pasqualigo says. As these islands were not seen twice, it appears most probable that he sailed along a coast trending approximately north and south, not east and west, and that he proceeded direct to Europe from the extreme point reached. Consequently it is not necessary to double the time taken in exploring. It seems, also, almost incredible that he could have sailed 300 or 600 leagues in June and seen no natives fishing. Apart from the actual statement about the coasting, the letter of Pasqualigo itself, when carefully analyzed, does not give the impression that the sojourn was lengthy; the facts reported are somewhat superficial in character, suggestive of haste, and could all have been gained in one locality. They erected only one set of territorial marks; this fact alone is enough to upset the idea of a prolonged survey. It may be noticed here incidentally that if these conclusions are sound in whole, or even in part, it becomes almost impossible to accept a landfall in Labrador and extremely difficult at Cape Breton.

It does not appear, therefore, that MR. HARRISSE has made out a *prima facie* case upon the want of time. How does his statement that Sebastian Cabot or Dr. Grajales invented the date 24 June stand?

The island of St. John figures on maps from 1505 forwards; it is not apparently one of the pre-Cabotian Atlantic isles; the frequent shifting of its position seems to indicate that it was not connected directly with the Breton voyage or the later English and Portuguese surveys which

completed the outline of the north-east coast. Its connexion by Sebastian Cabot with his father's first voyage seems to suggest the possibility of its representing the coast seen on this expedition. To accept this theory it is necessary to assume; (a) that Cabot's observations of latitude and longitude were wrong and misleading; (b) that his coasting did not extend far, and few territorial marks were erected; (c) that it was along apart of the north-east coast not much frequented at first by fishermen; and (d) consequently, that the identification of his landfall presented difficulties. These are all points well recognized by cartographers as having occurred in other cases.

The Cabotian legend, abridged, reads:—

"This land was discovered, 1494 [1497] on the 24th of June, in the morning [Hakluyt; about five of the clocke early in the morning,] to which they gave the name of Prima Tierra Vista, and to a large island which is near the said land they gave the name of St. John because it was discovered the same day."

The description of the country which follows evidently refers to the second voyage; but the date cannot, for Ramusio mentions Cabot's being in high latitudes on 11 June, apparently upon the second voyage.

What obligation was there for this map-maker to account for the island of St. John being where it was at all unless it had always been associated with Cabot's first voyage?

Assuming even that Sebastian Cabot placed the landfall at Cape North on Cape Breton Island, for reasons of state, it is more natural to assume that he would give the account an air of actuality (which the legend certainly has) by weaving into it the current ideas of this voyage. It may, not, however, be necessary even to assume political motives. It is possible that wrong readings of the latitude and longitude had obscured the position of the actual landfall. I am inclined to accept Mr. HARRISSE's theory that the location of the landfall was dictated by territorial considerations. The truth may lie between the two conjectures.

MR. HARRISSE is undoubtedly justified in questioning this legend, emanating as it apparently does from Sebastian. I think, however, he has not, so far, made out a sufficiently strong case to warrant the complete rejection of the date 24 June.

Hakluyt accepts the date. Between 1589 and 1599 he submitted the year of discovery to accurate, also possibly, to independent and adverse criticism as far as the Cabots were concerned, for he postpones the year of discovery. It seems only reasonable to suppose that the alleged date of the landfall was also closely scrutinized. The Fust MS. (and Barrett) ignores Cabot. This omission supports my statement that there must have been a distinct Bristol tradition; it does not coincide with Mr. HARRISSE's argument that Sebastian was the *fons et origo* of all these legends.

If Mr. HARRISSE will read a communication of mine to the *Canadian Gazette* of 26 Nov., 1896, and my remarks at Sir Clements Markham's lecture on 12 April (*Geographical Journal* for June, 1897, p. 616), he will see that, while personally in favour of Cape Bonavista or the vicinity, I asserted that there is "absolute uncertainty as to the position of the first landfall," and again that "there is no direct evidence of the first [coasting] voyage of Cabot." The presence of such words as Keels, Castileon, &c., in Bonavista Bay, have not, of course, the slightest value as direct evidence. The tablet at Halifax says: "John Cabot.....sailed in a Bristol ship The Matthew, and first planted the flags of England and Venice on the 24th of June, 1497." I strongly approve of the wording which follows: "on the north-eastern seaboard of North America," and I think I may claim some credit for its moderation. To avoid prejudicing the question of the landfall, I suggested in November, 1896, a monument at Cape Race as being free from contention. My proposal has since been endorsed by Sir C. Markham and in the United States.

The Fust Chronicle contains four statements found nowhere else; two of these are supported by independent

corroborative contemporary accounts of the voyage, apparently beyond the reach of the forger; the others, the name and registration of the ship, stand logically with the first two. The onus of proof lies upon the assailant. All the other matter, except the word America—the use of which is surely a question mainly for the grammarians—is either unquestionably true or quite credible.

In conclusion, Does it seem possible that a forger in 1760 could have been so skilful as to avoid committing himself to any palpably false statement? Why, even the minute point that 24 June, 1497, was in the Bristol civic year 1496 is correct.

66 Leamington Street,
Bradford.

G. R. F. PROWSE.